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ABSTRACT

This monograph reviews the literature on intervention for potential dropouts at the secondary school level in order to determine factors responsible for students being at risk and to provide information on a variety of projects and programs that are effectively alleviating the number of such students who fail to complete their education. The review found that what works for retaining potential dropouts at the secondary school level is as varied as the communities in which the students live. However, effective programs are usually doing the following: (1) providing various kinds of programs that improve students' skills in reading, writing, and mathematics; (2) creating an environment that is conducive to students' sense of belonging to their school and sharing the decision and policy-making procedures; (3) identifying students who do not participate in school activities and encouraging their involvement; (4) making counseling services available and accessible; (5) maintaining small classes in which students participate in cooperative sharing activities with other students and instructors; (6) offering opportunities for students to socially interact with responsible adult role models; (7) providing alternative programs and settings outside the regular academic environment; and (8) teaching job-related skills and basic skills in reading, writing, and mathematics concurrently. Included are 20 references. (JB)

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Intervention for At-Risk Students at the Secondary Level

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Abstract

Throughout American society the number of students who are at-risk of completing the requirements for a secondary education is increasing. Several reasons and/or factors contribute to students becoming at-risk. Although many factors impact on students being at-risk of completing a secondary education, socio-economic factors seem to have the greatest influence.

This report describes the factors that are responsible for students becoming at-risk. Furthermore, it provides information on a variety of projects and/ or programs that are working throughout the United States to alleviate the number of at-risk students who fail to complete their education.

The programs that were found to be most successful in retaining at-risk students at the secondary level incorporate teaching basic skills such as reading, writing and math and job/work related skills concurrently.

Intervention For At-Risk Students
at the Secondary School Level

At-risk students in American educational institutions present an extremely serious problem, in terms of both their own future and the future of the country. In fact, a major concern of the Council of Chief State School Officers is that the nation is at risk of beginning the 21st century with one out of every four students failing to master basic skills necessary for becoming a productive citizen. Mazerick (1987) presented alarming data derived from a report by Mary Futrell, past president of the National Education Association, which stated that one third of 40 million American public school children may be borderline at-risk. Glasser (1988) also reported that one half of the nation's school children are not achieving academically, and that this country will remain at-risk until effective ways are found to help these children.

American students are at-risk of completing a quality education for various reasons: among them are socio-economic and cultural deprivation; emotional, learning and/or physical disabilities; family problems, and graduation from high school without adequate reading and writing skills (Ralph, 1989). Ralph noted that many new programs are designed to reach secondary school students who are labeled at-risk. Before they can be reached, however, these students must first be definitively identified. Palmer (1989) concluded that such identification is not an easy task. After reviewing the literature, Palmer stated that "a major problem in identifying at-risk students in American

high schools is that no standard definition of at-risk students exists across school districts or state lines" (p. 10).

Levin (1985) identified at-risk students as those who are educationally disadvantaged, who lack the home and community support and resources necessary to benefit from conventional and traditional instruction. Therefore, these students may need educational intervention. Bishop (1987) identified them as "gray" students who are ignored by the schools and are frequently lost in the system. During his investigation of 200 students at Peak Junior High School in Colorado, Bishop categorized "gray students" as at-risk of not completing their education for the following reasons: excessive absenteeism and consequently low grades, poor self-images, negative attitudes about themselves and their school environment. These students are described as not participating in school activities and having very few friends. In many cases, they become discipline problems.

McCormick (1989), using demographic data gathered from school records and various reports throughout the United States defined at-risk students as potential dropouts because of the following variables: (a) academic performance in reading and mathematics one or more years below grade level, as indicated by standardized test scores; (b) parental responsibilities; (c) individual and/or family problems such as drugs or alcohol abuse; (d) traumatic experiences such as separation, divorce, or unemployment of parents; (e) emotional disturbances or physical illness; and (f) low economic status. McCormick (1989) also corrected the popular misconception that at-risk students are found almost exclusively

in crowded inner cities. In actuality, approximately 40% of the at-risk population live in urban cities, while 60% are dispersed throughout the country in both rural and certain suburban areas. Many of the latter group are at-risk because the adult family members are unemployed and the family may be homeless. A large number of students who are at-risk also are from migrant families. McCormick (1989) also disclosed that migrant students drop out of school at rates that fall in the range of 45% to 90% nationwide.

Hahn (1987) agreed that at-risk students are from disadvantaged backgrounds. In his study conducted on the dropout rates of 16- to 24-year-olds nationwide, Hahn noted that 17% were from disadvantaged backgrounds. He also discovered that the dropout rates varied in different regions of the country: the Southwest (21%) dropout rate, Northeast (18%), Southeast (11%), Northwest (9%). Contrary to McCormick's (1989) findings, Hahn found the percentage of dropouts almost twice as high in large, densely-populated cities as that in small, less urban areas (25% in the former, 13% in the latter).

Graduation and dropout rates indicate the effectiveness of high school programs. Therefore, many high schools provide dropout preventive services (Barrington & Bryan, 1989). However, the measures these schools take to retain students are often diverse. Possible solutions have proven to be as diverse as the communities in which the students live (McCormick, 1989).
Wehlage, Rutter, and Turnbaugh (1987) maintained that "although educators are looking for interventions to reduce the number of school dropouts, we know more about who has dropped out, and why

than we know about interventions to reduce the number of school dropouts" (p. 70). Wehlage et al. (1987) maintained that educators must provide nothing less than experiences sufficiently positive enough to change the lives of these young people. School personnel must design and implement programs that promote personal and social growth, and thus raise students' self-esteem. Wehlage suggested that one way to meet this objective involves changing students' negative attitudes with varied activities that encourage positive student-teacher interactions.

To support their theories, Wehlage et al. (1987) noted that vocational education programs combined with high school experiences provide positive outcomes for students at-risk of dropping out of school. Their program included the following components: (a) administration and organization, which referred to administrators keeping class size small so that students could closely interact with their peers and teachers; (b) teacher culture, which referred to instructors dealing with each student as a whole person, with any problems that students might be experiencing in his or her home, community, or peer group; (c) student culture, which referred to students learning responsible behavior through interacting with responsible adults, also to their learning the meaning and value of rules and expectations; (d) curriculum, which referred to designing activities that differed from those ordinarily found in high school, in that they provide for the constant feedback required by students who lack basic skills; and (e) experiential learning, which referred to at-risk students interacting socially with significant adults who

exemplify the traits of responsibility and perseverance inherent in the work ethnic. This learning occurs as students are involved in volunteer work with the adults at various community service agencies or participate in other volunteer activities.

Bishop (1987) implemented a successful program with 200 at-risk junior high school students in Colorado. This program combined team teaching; flexible scheduling; cooperative and sharing activities; counseling; and an expanded curriculum that included guest speakers, field trips, group social activities, and after school mini-courses that emphasized reading, writing, and mathematics. Bishop's program produced the following positive outcomes: (a) students developed friendships with significant adult role models such as counselors, and other parents; (b) students reported that they enjoyed the caring attention they received; (c) students earned better grades and exhibited more positive attitudes toward themselves and school and (d) most importantly, these at-risk students became interested in school activities, both curricular and extra-curricular.

Often students themselves can identify the reasons they have become dissatisfied with their schools. Beacham (1988) conducted a study at a Florida high school to determine students' perceptions of how to improve their schools. His study included 166 at-risk students and 116 dropouts. These at-risk students identified the following areas in which the high school needed to change to serve them better: (1) the general school policies, (2) the way faculty and staff relate to students, (3) the current grading and testing procedure, (4) the guidance and counseling

services, and (5) the kind of and the number of curriculum offerings. The dropouts identified (1,2,3,4) as areas that needed to be changed in their schools.

In a similar study, Bryke (1989) examined the effects of school characteristics on the probability of dropping out, focusing on absenteeism as the strongest predictor of students' dropping out. This study included 30,000 sophomores in 1100 high schools nationwide. In 1980, questionnaires and standardized instruments were administered to these students. The students, both those remaining in school as well as those who later dropped out were resurveyed two years later.

The analysis of data revealed less absenteeism and lower dropout rates in high schools whose faculty members showed genuine interest in their students and in those schools where a great emphasis was on academic pursuits. Absenteeism was found least prevalent in schools in which there was less diversity among students' backgrounds and more commonality in students ' programs. This finding was especially true for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Bennett (1988) noted that "schools that are good give students a respect and an interest in learning, habits, and motivation necessary for success and achievement. Few students drop out of these schools" (p. 16). These good schools, moreover, offer counseling and educational intervention to meet students' personal and academic needs.

Braucht and Weime (1990), conducted a study to determine the counseling services needed for at-risk students in a rural area

in Illinois. This study included 49 counselors working with at-risk youths and 150 students enrolled in the local high school. The students responded to a questionnaire that required them to identify problems or issues encountered by adolescents in their community, and how they used available sources to solve these problems. Students also responded to a second questionnaire formulated from the adolescent's point of view, in which the questions were open-ended.

The results of the study indicated that students felt alcohol-related problems and family dysfunction were the two most serious problems faced by these at-risk students. The students also noted that teen centers, self-help groups and meaningful employment would help them and other students remain in school. The students indicated that, although they occasionally used the counseling service in their school, most often they sought help from their peers. The results of the study led Braucht and Weime (1990) to recommend that schools provide peer counseling services, with adult counselors monitoring and working closely with student-counselors.

At-risk students need programs that identify dropping out as a developmental process that begins in the early years and often manifests itself later at the secondary level. Early prevention programs can alleviate the dropout rate at the secondary level. Finn (1989), in support of this view, described two models that explained why students are dropping out at the secondary school level. The first model was described as the frustration-self esteem model, which referred to students developing low self-image

in response to frustration and embarrassment they suffered because of their poor academic performance. Unfortunately, some students' negative self-images originate in academic failures that may be attributed to undetected learning disabilities. These learning-disabled students' frustrations often manifest themselves in disruptive behavior as more attention is focused on their behavior than on attempts to discover the reason for it.

Finn's (1989) second model was described as participation-identification, which referred to students dropping out of school because they lacked a sense of belonging to and bonding with their school. Finn found that participation in school and classroom activities helped students develop and maintain a feeling of belonging and attachment to school. Involvement in these activities also helped students develop positive self-images. Intervention aimed at increasing student participation must begin early. Faculty and staff can intervene, and thereby decrease students' feelings of alienation, by adhering to the following guidelines: (a) expand cooperative activities among students and staff, (b) keep classes small, (c) include students in policy-making and decision-making, and (d) identify those non-participatory students as early as possible.

Kite and Blanton (1986) in an earlier study also found that students' sense of alienation in school begins early and is a more accurate predictor than all other behavioral symptoms and precedes dropping out of school. Kite and Blanton found that, although 30% of the students who have dropped out had learning disabilities, academically capable students were also at-risk of dropping out.

In their study nationwide, Kite and Blanton discovered, that an average of 66% of students who dropout have the intellectual ability to complete high school. These students dropout because they felt socially and academically alienated.

Another problem identified as affecting the dropout rate in secondary school was the students' need to work for financial reasons (McCormick, 1989; Braucht & Weime, 1990). Often at-risk students need programs that offer employment and educational opportunities concurrently. Sipe (1988) focused on a Summer Training and Educational program (STEP) that reduced the number of students leaving school without the skills and motivation necessary to secure productive employment. This program featured an ongoing collaboration between public schools and the Federal Summer Youth Employment Training Program. The program lasted for eight weeks under the auspices of The Job Training Partnership Act. Summer income was used as an incentive for participation in the program.

This program included initially 1,500 low income, 14-15-year-olds nationwide who all were performing poorly in reading, writing and math skills. These students participating in this program were therefore, required to work on these basic academic skills for half of the 15 months allotted for the program. Each week, small groups of students received 90 hours of instruction and completed several self-paced learning activities. The program also required students to work with a Life Learning Skill Module that focused on socially and sexually responsible attitudes.

To determine the effects of this program, comparisons were made between students assigned to experimental groups and control groups' pre-and post-test scores on the Metropolitan Achievement Test and the Summer Youth Employment Training Questionnaire. Results showed that students in the experimental group, receiving instruction in basic skills as well as training in job related skills improved significantly better than students in the control group who received only the work related experiences. Students' responses on the questionnaire also indicated that students felt the basic skill training helped them tremendously.

Thompson (1988) discussed a federally-initiated job-training program offered throughout the United States beginning in 1987. This program combined work experiences with remediation in basic reading, writing and math skills. The program was designed on the recognition that American youths are unemployed because they are deficient in essential skills.

To assess the impact of this program,a study was conducted by telephone interviews with administrators in 200 job-training areas in 43 states. The number of youths served was 112,000. The following results emerged: (a) pre-testing and post-testing scores indicated that students were improving in all skill areas; (b) 60% of the administrators interviewed stated that remediation improved their programs; (c) remedial services were provided in reading, writing, and math for 4% of the high school dropouts and the services were steadily increasing among the program participants, and (d) overall accurate evaluation of services was difficult because of both the program's goals and the methods used to

measure success differed from state to state.

Medley, and Jones (1988) described a community-based program designed to improve the literacy skills of 13 at-risk adolescents between the ages of 11 to 18 just completing their summer community jobs created for disadvantaged youths. These students displayed the typical characteristics of at-risk (potential dropout students):

1. lacked an affiliation with the school,
2. demonstrated inadequacy, insecurity and isolation,
3. exhibited alienation with either extreme shyness or boisterousness,
4. lacked confidence, were easily discouraged, and painfully self-conscious about being in grades below their peers,
5. voiced low self-esteem and
6. disillusioned with the learning process. (p.6)

This program was community based and evolved from Project Literacy United States (Plus) that mobilizes community resources for dealing with illiteracy. The program was conducted two weeks prior to the fall school term at a high school in Albany, Georgia. Three teachers worked with the students using a variety of teaching materials. Some of the materials used included newspapers, maps, job pamphlets, forms and menus from various restaurants. Newspapers were used daily to improve students' reading attitudes. Small groups focused mainly on comprehension, vocabulary and study skills. Another aspect of the program included field trips. The field trips broadened the students' background knowledge, introduced new concepts and provided cultural

experiences.

To determine the effects of the program the Gates MacGinitie Reading Test and the Attitude Toward Learning Education Questionnaire were administered. These instruments were used on a pre- and post-test basis. The results of the study indicated that students' mean reading scores increased significantly. All students began the school year with enhanced reading skills. The students' responses on the questionnaire indicated that they felt better about themselves, their education, and their relationship with others.

Furthermore, after working with the at-risk students, the teachers identified the following factors as important:

1. getting to know students personally helped them to have reading sessions that were more relevant and interesting;
2. utilizing community resources made the learning more interesting and relevant to the students;
3. using various kinds of innovations unlike those found in regular school were helpful;
4. having cooperative learning environments rather than a competitive settings were more effective with the students; and
5. providing small groups was especially helpful for correcting poor speech and other skill deficiencies.

Overall, the project allowed the students to have experiences they did not have in the regular school setting.

Finally, what works for retaining at-risk students at the secondary level is as varied as the communities in which the

students live. Helping at-risk students to remain in school and acquire a quality education requires involving the school board, school administrators, faculty, and when possible, parents. It is important that the school implement the strategies and suggestions found in research investigations, policy reports and accounts of successful instructional intervention that have been used in secondary schools. Rumberger (1988) stated emphatically that successful programs often include a combination of academic subjects and vocational studies. Schools need to address the psychological needs of the at-risk students and provide activities where they perceive individually someone cares about them.

From this review of the literature, the following methods were found effective for at-risk secondary school students: (a) providing various kinds of programs that improve students' skills in reading, writing, and math, (b) creating an environment conducive to students' sense of belonging to their schools and with them sharing in the schools' decision- and policy-making procedures, (c) identifying students who do not participate in school activities and encouraging their involvement; (d) making counseling services, particular peer-counseling available and accessible, (e) maintaining small classes in which students participate in cooperative sharing activities with other students and instructors, (f) offering opportunities in and out of school for students to socially interact with responsible adult role models such as teachers, community leaders, and other parents, and finally (g) providing alternative programs and settings outside the regular academic environment, such as the Summer Job Training

Educational Program (STEP). Programs that are particularly effective teach job/work related skills and basic skills in reading, writing and mathematics concurrently.

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